

# **SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

**3**

## **OPEN OUR EYES: THE INVISIBILITY OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

**2 Kings 6:8-23**

**By John Ebert**

*“For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”*

*John 9:39*

## AIM OF STUDY

- To understand that because spiritual warfare takes place in the invisible spiritual realm, we need the Holy Spirit's help to see the battles and recognize them for what they are.

## KEY VERSE

“And Elisha prayed, ‘O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”  
2 Kings 6:17

## PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**how to teach the Bible in small group**” and “**some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to help resource you for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* as excellent resources for study.

For this study, you may want to have a map of the Middle East during the Old Testament times of the kings to show your group members. This can help make the characters and events more real to them.

## OPENERS

At about 4:00 a.m. one morning, I was awakened by my telephone ringing. Still half asleep, I answered. A man asked for a woman I didn’t know. I said I didn’t know her and suggested he had a wrong number. He persisted, and eventually I figured out that he was looking for his daughter. He thought she was staying with someone with

my name. Finally, he decided that I probably wasn't the person he was looking for and hung up. Naturally, I went back to bed.

At first, I thought this was just one of life's annoyances. But later, the Holy Spirit prompted me to consider that it was not accidental. From the brief conversation that I had with this man, I learned that he was trying to contact his daughter, but wasn't sure where she was. He also was not happy about where he thought she was staying. Without knowing any more details, it was obvious that there were problems in their relationship. The Holy Spirit showed me that He had arranged for this man to call me "by mistake" so that I could pray for him and his daughter.

**\*Have any of you had times when the Holy Spirit revealed what was going on "behind the scenes" in a spiritual battle?**

Most spiritual warfare is similar to my experience with this telephone call. The visible facts do not make up the whole story. The untimely hour and mistaken identity supported my initial conclusion that this was just a meaningless annoyance. Only with the guidance of the Holy Spirit did I become aware that something more significant was going on. And only by trusting in His guidance was I able to do my part in the battle, to invite God to work in the relationship of this man and his daughter.

If you study the history of warfare (human, physical wars like World War II or the Invasions in Iraq), you'll find that some of the innovative technology used in warfare is not weaponry, but devices to enhance the fighters' ability to see. One of the first uses of airplanes in war was to scout out where the enemy troops were. Radar and sonar both provided alternative ways to locate enemies that were not visible to the eye. More recently, satellite surveillance and night vision goggles have given armies new ways to find the enemy. These developments point out that an initial task in fighting the enemy is to identify the opponents and their location.

Just like in physical warfare, it's vital in spiritual warfare to determine where the battle is being fought. Since spiritual warfare takes place in the spiritual realm, we cannot see what is going on simply relying on our own eyesight. And often we aren't even aware of the battles we are in. In this study, we learn that different people have varying levels of awareness of activity in the spiritual realm, and that prayer is crucial in enhancing our ability to see where the battle is.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

The books of First and Second Kings record the history of Israel from the glorious beginning of King Solomon's reign until Israel's humbling demise in exile. After Solomon's death, his kingdom was divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah. Many of the kings proved unfaithful to God and the people of the northern kingdom were defeated and exiled by Assyria between 733 and 722 BC. In 587 BC, the southern kingdom was similarly conquered and exiled by Babylon (Pfeiffer, pp. 917-918). Most of both books record a chronological history of Israel and Judah's kings. But the last few chapters of First Kings and the first few

chapters of Second Kings interweave these rulers' stories with the exploits of Elijah and Elisha, two of God's great prophets.

Often, these prophets were in conflict with the kings and rebuked the kings' evil behavior. At other times, they helped the kings by providing advice or miraculous assistance. This passage recorded an instance in which Elisha was assisting the king of Israel against his enemy, the king of Aram. Aram was northeast of the northern kingdom of Israel, more or less where Syria is today. Since they were neighbors, there was a lot of fighting between Israel and Aram.

The books of First and Second Kings were originally one work. They cover the end of King David's life (see 1 and 2 Samuel for history prior to this) through the exile to Babylon. The purpose seems to be an explanation of why God's covenant curses have fallen on the former residents of Judah living in exile. There are contrasts between the kings who remained faithful to Yahweh and those who were especially wicked. 2 Kings ends with the Babylonian king releasing the Jewish king, Jehoiachin, from prison and treating him with greater honor than any other king. This probably serves as a note of hope that the exile would not last forever and that one day God would restore His people to their city, Jerusalem (Ball, pp. 30–38).

**Pray together that God would protect each of you as you study this passage. Also ask that He would open your spiritual eyes to see more clearly what He is doing. And ask that He would deposit greater faith in your group members so that each of you could participate more fully in advancing His kingdom.**

### **STUDY THE PASSAGE: 2 Kings 6:8-23**

As we will read, the king of Aram learned that Elisha, the prophet of God, is helping the king of Israel by revealing the king of Aram's war plans. Aram's king decides to remedy this situation by eliminating Elisha. However, this will not be as easy as he expects because the battle is both spiritual as well as a physical.

**1. Read 2 Kings 6:8-23. Look at verses 8-12. What does Elisha "see" or know that others would not know? How often does this happen?**

Elisha is telling the king of Israel about the king of Aram's secret battle plans. This enables the king of Israel to thwart the king of Aram's plans. Elisha does this repeatedly. The Hebrew text literally says "not once and not twice." This happens often enough that the king of Aram realizes that something is going on. He starts investigating his own people because he suspects one of them is a spy working for the king of Israel.

**2. How does Elisha know these things? Hint: consider the phrases used to refer to Elisha.**

The king of Aram assumes that there must be a spy in his inner circle who is reporting these things to the king of Israel. This is a logical assumption for the

natural mind. One of the king's "officers" (or "servants," depending on which translation you are using) tells that king that there is no spy, but that Elisha is sending their plans to the king of Israel. A natural mind might think this accusation is a ruse to convince the king of Aram to stop looking for a spy in his midst. Perhaps one might assume that the officer who accuses Elisha is the actual spy for the king of Israel. However, the Bible indicates (in verse 9) that it really is Elisha, the man of God, who is doing this.

The key phrase in this passage is "man of God." This phrase in Hebrew appears most frequently in First and Second Kings. In these books, it invariably refers to a prophet like Elijah or Elisha. (In other books in the Old Testament, this phrase has other meanings. For instance, in Judges 13:6 and 13:8, it probably refers to an angel.) In the Hebrew text, this "man of God" is not identified as Elisha until verse 12, although the NIV mentions his name in verse 10. Verse 12 also identifies Elisha as a prophet in Israel, further confirming that "man of God" is synonymous with "prophet" in this passage.

One of the characteristics of the prophets like Elijah and Elisha is that God sometimes gives them knowledge of things, which they would not otherwise know. An example of this occurs in 2 Kings 5:26 when Elisha knows what his servant has done, even though the servant has done it secretly. Identifying the prophet as a "man of God" emphasizes that such knowledge and the miraculous deeds he does result from his close relationship with God. Thus, there is not a spy in the court as the king of Aram suspects. Instead, God is revealing the secret plans of Aram to Elisha so he can tell the king of Israel.

An interesting aspect of this passage is that Elisha is the only person who is mentioned by name. Unlike most of First and Second Kings in which kings are referred to by name, even kings of Aram, this passage never names either king. Similarly, in some passages, the servant of Elisha is named, but not in this one. This emphasizes the power of God working through Elisha rather than being a text about the historical experiences of a particular king.

**\* Have you ever had an experience where you "saw" or "knew" something like this? How did you know it?**

People are sometimes reluctant to share such experiences because they are not as confident as Elisha appears to be that God has revealed something to them. One of the strengths of the Vineyard movement is admitting that such uncertainty is appropriate and that we need to experiment with such things to learn to recognize when God is speaking. 1 Cor. 14:29 says that when prophets speak, "others should weigh carefully what is said." The purpose of this is not simply to judge when the messages are not from God, but to encourage the prophets when they are hearing from God so they can gain confidence in listening to God. Elisha was a follower of Elijah before he was a prophet on his own, and he probably learned a lot about hearing from God from Elijah. Similarly, we should encourage one another to share our

experiences in hearing from God and help each other evaluate whether or how God is speaking to us.

**3. Read to verses 13-17. What does Elisha's servant see at the beginning of this section (vv. 13-15)?**

Elisha's servant sees an army that the king of Aram has sent to capture Elisha.

**\*What do you think he is feeling?**

The natural reaction to being surrounded by an enemy army would be fear. Elisha's response in verse 6 implies that this is how the servant reacts.

Another possible interpretation is to assume that the servant has enough experience with Elisha to know that God is in control of the situation and there is no need to worry. From this perspective, the servant's question, "What shall we do?", is seeking direction rather than indicating despair. It might be interpreted as "What is God's plan to get us out of this situation?" However, the interjection "Oh" at the beginning of the question, Elisha's response "Don't be afraid", and Elisha's prayer that his servant would see the situation differently all favor the view that the servant is afraid.

**4. What is the situation in the physical realm (vv. 16-17)?**

In the physical realm, the situation is that there are only two on Elisha's side—Elisha and his servant—and there is a whole army from Aram surrounding them. The situation appears to be very bad for Elisha. However, there is more to this world than what is physical and visible to the natural eye.

In the spiritual realm, there are more soldiers for Elisha and his servant than for the army of Aram. In fact, there is a whole spiritual army, "horses and chariots of fire," protecting Elisha. Incidentally, Elisha had previously seen horses and a chariot of fire. In 2 Kings 2:11, while Elisha was Elijah's apprentice, a chariot and horses of fire appeared and separated them when Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind. It must have been memorable for Elisha when God permitted him to witness the miraculous power of His heavenly army (Vannoy, p.526).

**5. How does Elisha's servant become aware of the situation in the spiritual realm (v. 17)?**

Elisha's servant cannot see the horses and chariots of fire, the army God sent to protect them, until Elisha prays that God would open his eyes.

Although Elisha performed many miracles by the power of God and often spoke God's messages to people, only two passages in the Bible refer to Elisha praying. In this passage, Elisha prays three different times that God

would open or blind someone's eyes (vv. 17, 18 and 20). The other reference to Elisha praying is in 2 Kings 4:33 when he prays for a dead boy and God brings the boy back to life. One might speculate from this that it takes as much help from God to enable us to see the true situation in the spiritual realm as it takes to raise someone from the dead.

Also note that this passage does not indicate whether or not Elisha could see God's army, the horses and chariots of fire, protecting him. The servant saw it after Elisha prayed. Elisha may have been able to see it, too, or he may simply have known from his experience with God that built his faith, that the warriors from God protecting him were more than the enemy soldiers attacking him.

**6. Did the situation change between the beginning and the end of this section? What did change?**

The situation did not change – the army from God was there before Elisha's servant could see it, and Elisha knew it was there. What changed was the servant's ability to see what how God was protecting them.

**\* Have you ever experienced such a change in perspective? How did it happen?**

**7. Examine verses 18-20. Who does Elisha pray for in these verses? How do Elisha's prayers affect their vision?**

In these verses, Elisha prays for his enemies, the army of Aram.

In response to Elisha's first prayer (v. 18), the army of Aram is struck with blindness. The Hebrew word that is translated as "blindness" here is *sanverim*. The typical Hebrew word for blindness is *ivver* or *ivvaron*. *Sanverim* only appears in two passages in the Bible: this one (twice) and Gen. 19:11, where the men of Sodom are trying to attack Lot and the angels with him strike them with blindness. *Sanverim* appears to be related to the Hebrew word for light. "Light" seems to imply the opposite of blindness because light normally helps us see. However, too much light can prevent us from seeing; for this, an appropriate translation might be "dazzle." One might think of a bright day when there is so much glare from the sun reflecting off a desert, a beach, the ocean, or some snow that it is hard to see anything. Another example might be driving toward a sunset but having difficulty seeing the road because the sun is so bright.

In any case, there are some unusual features in both this passage and in Gen. 19:11 that indicate some special meaning. In both cases, the blindness results from God's intervention through angels or prayer, and it appears to be temporary. The Genesis passage reports that the men cannot find the door, but even if they couldn't see, it would seem that, with some effort, they would be able to locate a door in a familiar neighborhood. In the 2 Kings passage, it seems strange that the men would continue their mission and travel to

another city in enemy territory if they couldn't see anything. It may be that they could still physically see and the "blindness" had to do with their ability to recognize what they were seeing. In other words, they didn't recognize Elisha or realize who he was or notice where they were. This may be similar to stories about people taking Bibles into countries where Bibles are illegal. Even though the border guards opened the suitcases and looked directly at the Bibles, they let the people and the Bibles pass into the country anyway.

The second time Elisha prays for the army of Aram (v. 20), he uses almost the same words in Hebrew as when he prayed for his servant (v.17). However, where his servant was able to see the spiritual realm after Elisha prayed for him, the lifting of the army of Aram's blindness enables them to see the physical realm more accurately again. They realize they are in the middle of Samaria, the capital city of their enemy, Israel. God has used this blindness, this inability to recognize where they were or whom they were with, to allow Israel to capture the opposing army. This also demonstrates some continuity between the physical and spiritual realms. We may need God's assistance to recognize what is happening in the physical realm as well as to become aware of what is going on in the spiritual realm.

**\* Have you ever experienced something like this (looking, but not seeing)?**

Sometimes we experience this in the physical realm. We are looking for our keys or a particular piece of paper, and we stare directly at the thing a couple of times but don't see it. This is like the army of Aram looking at Elisha and not realizing he was the man they were trying to capture.

In other cases, we don't see something because we aren't looking for it or don't expect it to be there. Some simple illustrations of this are the difficulty in proof reading a sentence that has the word *the* duplicated. If one *the* is at the end of a line and the other is at the beginning of the next line, we tend not to notice the duplication because we only expect one *the*. There is a similar word puzzle that involves counting how many times the letter "f" appears in a specific sentence. Most people miss half the "f's" in the sentence because they are in the word *of*. For some reason, we don't tend to see or notice little words like *of*, even when we are looking for specific letters in them. A more dangerous example is how often people involved in automobile accidents say that they never saw the other vehicle. If we have such difficulty seeing things in the physical realm, is it any wonder that we need God's help to see in the spiritual realm?

**8. Study verses 21-23. How does the king of Israel react to the presence of his enemies in his city? Why does this make sense?**

The initial reaction of the king of Israel is that he should kill the captives Elisha has brought him. According to the rules of war given to Israel by God through Moses and recorded in Deut.20: 13, captives taken in battle were to be killed.

On the other hand, Deut. 20:11 says that people who accepted an offer of peace should be spared and should work for the people of Israel. Since the army of Aram had not actually engaged in battle with Israel or accepted an offer of peace, it is not clear which of these rules should apply.

However, there are a couple of precedents for the king choosing to apply the rule to kill instead of the one to spare the captives. In 1 Sam. 15, God through Samuel orders Saul, the king of Israel, to destroy the Amalekites, killing all of them including their animals (1 Sam. 15:1-3). Saul kills most of them, but spares the king of Amalek and the best of the animals (1 Sam. 15:8-9). As a result of this failure to fully obey, God rejects Saul as king of Israel and chooses another instead (1 Sam. 15:26-18).

Similarly, in 1 Kings 20, Ahab, another king of Israel, defeats the army of Ben-Hadad, king of Aram. He captures Ben-Hadad and does not kill him (1 Kings 20:29-34). A prophet from God condemns Ahab for letting Ben-Hadad go free when the Lord had determined that he should die (1 Kings 20:42). In fact, the prophet tells Ahab that Ahab's life will be for Ben-Hadad's life, implying that Ahab will die instead. In both these cases, the king of Israel was condemned for not killing his captives. Based on this, it seems natural that the king of Israel might be anxious to kill the captives from Aram.

#### **9. What changes the king of Israel's view of the situation?**

Rather than immediately killing the captives, the king of Israel asked Elisha if he should kill them. In the prior examples (1 Sam. 15 and 1 Kings 20), the general law from Deut. 20:13 was not applied routinely. Instead, God gave a specific instruction for each situation indicating that the captives should be killed. So the king of Israel rightly sought such direction from God by asking God's prophet, Elisha, what he should do. God's response through Elisha was that the king of Israel should not kill the captives, but show them mercy, feed them, and send them home.

#### **10. How did God's plan and the king of Israel's initial plan differ in approach and outcome?**

Destroying the army of Aram, as the king of Israel suggested, would be consistent with some Old Testament commands. The traditional view of the Old Testament is that the judgment of God dominates. In many stories, sinners are punished for their sin and not forgiven. However, God's response in this situation is to show mercy. Instead of destroying the enemy army, the king of Israel is told to care for them – to give them food and drink – and let them go home. This actually is not a contradiction of God's holiness or His laws. When the Ten Commandments and the covenant with Israel are read carefully, God promises abundant blessing and love to those who trust, honor and obey Him. Sadly, Israel often missed the opportunity to be an example of people experiencing the blessing of God because they broke faith with Him

repeatedly. God often showed His patience and loyalty despite this, and forgave and rescued His wayward people.

The 2 Kings 6 story foreshadows such New Testament commands as “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” in Luke 6:27-36 and Matt. 5:44-48. According to Matt., such a loving response to enemies imitates God’s blessing of both evil and good people. Since God loves His enemies, we should, too. God made this abundantly clear when Jesus died for us while we were still His enemies (Rom. 5:6-8). Furthermore, Rom. 12:20 commands, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” This is a quote from Prov. 25:21-22 which also promises that God will reward those who do this.

The result of the king of Israel obeying God and blessing his enemies is peace between Israel and Aram (2 Kings 6:23). So when killing the enemy might have escalated into increasing violence and devastation, blessing the enemy brought a temporary end to the conflict. This required the eyes of faith to see God in control of the precarious situation and obey His commands.

**\*When has it been difficult for you to obey God? What did you need to believe about the Lord in order to obey Him?**

#### **APPLYING THE TEXT**

**\*Which of the following characters do you identify with?**

**Elisha, who sees what God is doing?**

**The servant, who needs prayer to see God’s plan?**

**The enemy army, who oppose God and are blind to what is going on?**

**The king of Israel, who needs direction in order to see God’s plan?**

One of the difficulties with spiritual warfare is that we cannot normally see the spiritual realm and are blind to the conflicts that are happening there. We can only find out what is going on if God reveals it to us. This passage suggests several ways that we can make ourselves more available to God to show us the spiritual battle. Like Elisha, we can seek a closer relationship with God, to be men and women of God. Like the servant, we can pray or have others pray for us that God would open our eyes. Like the king of Israel, we can ask for direction from others who are close to God. Once God shows us the battle, then we can ask Him how we are to fight.

**\*Let’s pray for one another that God would open our eyes to the spiritual battle around us and to show us what He is doing to protect you. Be sensitive to what God may be doing to “open our eyes.” God may speak through a prophetic word, a Scripture, an impression, or some other way rather than a vision.**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

In this passage, God works powerfully in several ways even when others don't perceive Him. He reveals the secret plans to His servant Elisha in order that Elisha can help the king of Israel. Secondly, He supplies a supernatural army to protect His prophet and the prophet's servant. Thirdly, He miraculously blinds the enemy troops until Israel's army surrounds them. And lastly, just when it looks like God's soldiers will slaughter their enemies, God mercifully intervenes with a word of mercy for the king of Israel. Out of all this conflict and suspense, God works safety and a brief time of peace for those who trust and obey Him.

This passage should encourage us when we are in the midst of spiritual struggles. We are not alone, and God has not stopped being loving and merciful. In 2 Kings 6, God brings greater good for more people out of warfare, and this should strengthen our faith when all we can see at the moment is frightening. This week, ask God for greater revelation and look with eyes of faith to see what God is doing in your life, in the lives of those around you, and in the world at large.

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